

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRUSSELS 04193

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: BE, PINT
SUBJECT: DOMESTIC POLITICAL STRESSES AFFECT BELGIUM'S
BEHAVIOR ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

REFS: A. USNATO 1809
B. BRUSSELS 3462 (NOTAL)
C. BRUSSELS 2603

SUMMARY: ITS RECORD OF NINE MONTHS IN OFFICE DEMONSTRATES
THAT THE MASSIVE SECOND TINDEMANS COALITION IS IN FACT A
WEAK GOVERNMENT HAVING GREAT DIFFICULTY IN HANDLING URGENT
MATTERS OF PUBLIC POLICY. THE REASONS FOR THIS PARADOXICAL
WEAKNESS ARE SEVERAL: (1) PREOCCUPATION WITH THE ENDLESSLY
CONTROVERSIAL REGIONALIZATION REFORM OF THE BELGIAN STATE,
(2) TINDEMANS' RELUCTANCE TO LEAD HIS FRACTIONAL COALITION
AGGRESSIVELY, (3) PERSISTENCE OF AN OBSTRUCTIONIST OPPOS-
ITION MENTALITY IN THE BELGIAN SOCIALIST PARTY, AND
(4) LACK OF A COHERENT COALITION PROGRAM TO DEAL WITH THE
COUNTRY'S PERSISTING ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. THE WEAKNESS OF
TINDEMANS II IS BEGINNING TO AFFECT BELGIUM'S POSTURE ON
THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE, PARTICULARLY WITH RESPECT TO
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SECURITY ISSUES. UNABLE TO DEAL BRISKLY WITH SUCH PRESSING
ISSUES AS HAWK MODERNIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
NATO LONG-TERM DEFENSE PROGRAM, THE GOVERNMENT RESORTS TO
STALLING TACTICS TO AVOID HARD DECISIONS ON SECURITY
MATTERS. THIS DEVICE IS OFTEN RESORTED TO IN HANDLING
DIFFICULT DOMESTIC PROBLEMS, BUT IT IS UNCHARACTERISTIC
OF BELGIUM WHEN DEALING WITH VITAL ISSUES SUCH AS NATIONAL

SECURITY. THE PROSPECTS ARE NEVERTHELESS THAT INTERNAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC MALAISE WILL CONTINUE TO AFFECT BELGIAN BEHAVIOR IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS FOR SOME TIME TO COME. END SUMMARY

1. NINE MONTHS AGO PRIME MINISTER LEO TINDEMANS FORMED HIS SECOND CABINET, A GOVERNMENT REPRESENTING 172 OUT OF 212 REPRESENTATIVES IN THE LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT. "TINDEMANS II" WAS SPECIFICALLY CONSTRUCTED TO ACHIEVE THE DEFINITIVE STRUCTURAL REFORM OF THE BELGIAN STATE, FOR WHICH AN AGREED BLUEPRINT -- THE SO-CALLED EGMONT ACCORD NEGOTIATED BY THE MEMBER PARTIES OF THE NEW COALITION -- WAS ALREADY AT HAND. THE MASS PARTIES, THE SOCIALISTS AND THE CHRISTIANS, AND THE TWO LINGUISTIC PARTIES WHICH CONSTITUTE THE TINDEMANS II COALITION PLEDGED THEMSELVES TO HANG TOGETHER FOR TWO LEGISLATIVE PERIODS SO THAT THE NECESSARY CONSTITUTIONAL STEPS COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED. IT WAS FURTHER ASSUMED THAT A COALITION COVERING THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM FROM THE NON-COMMUNIST LEFT TO THE NON-CAVEDWELLING RIGHT WOULD BE ABLE TO FASHION AN ACTION PROGRAM TO DEAL PURPOSEFULLY WITH THE STRUCTURAL AND CYCLICAL ILLS OF BELGIUM'S TROUBLED ECONOMY.

2. JUNE 1977 AND ITS BUOYANT MOOD IS NOW BEGINNING TO LOOK LIKE A LONG TIME AGO. THE EGMONT PLAN HAS BEEN DRAGGED FORWARD A FEW STEPS TOWARD REALIZATION BUT ONLY AT THE CONFIDENTIAL

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COST OF FRAYED NERVES AND MARATHON BICKERING. MORE IMPORTANT, THE "COMMUNITIES QUESTION" HAS ABSORBED MOST OF THE ATTENTION AND TOO MUCH OF THE ENERGIES OF THE GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP. PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS PERSONALLY DEPLORES THIS SITUATION, PARTICULARLY BECAUSE HE FEARS THAT RADICAL DECENTRALIZATION OF HIS SMALL BELGIAN STATE IS A DUBIOUS -- PERHAPS DISASTROUS -- OBJECTIVE. IN THE SHORT RUN THE COMMITMENT TO REGIONALIZATION HAS COMPELLED THE PRIME MINISTER TO SPEND INORDINATE TIME SCOLDING AND CAJOLING INTO MINIMAL COOPERATION POLITICIANS OSTENSIBLY COMMITTED TO HIS LEADERSHIP. MOSTLY BECAUSE THE SOCIALIST PARTY HAS INVESTED VERY LITTLE OF HEART OR MIND IN THIS GOVERNMENT, TINDEMANS II -- ITS MASSIVE AUTOMATIC MAJORITY NOTWITHSTANDING -- HAS SO FAR BEEN ABLE TO GET DONE SCARCELY MORE THAN THE MOST ROUTINE BUSINESS. IN PRIVATE TINDEMANS SPEAKS NOSTALGICALLY OF THE BARE MAJORITY HE COMMANDED IN TINDEMANS I WHEN "IT WAS POSSIBLE TO GOVERN."

3. SOME HARD-EYED OBSERVERS OF THE POLITICAL SCENE ASSERT THAT THE WEAKEST ELEMENT IN THE SECOND TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT IS TINDEMANS HIMSELF. THE OLD APPRAISAL OF LEO TINDEMANS AS A DECENT FELLOW WITHOUT THE FORCE AND FIRM-

NESS OF A REAL LEADER -- LITTLE MENTIONED DURING THE YEARS
OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S SOARING POPULARITY -- IS HEARD
AGAIN. UNQUESTIONABLY TINDEMANS HAS MADE NO EFFORT TO
REGIMENT HIS CABINET. THIS IS NOT HIS STYLE, AND HE HAS
HEARD NO POPULAR DEMAND FOR RESORT TO THE MAILED FIST.
SO HE IS AVOIDING SHOWDOWNS (EVEN WHEN BRUISED BY AD
HOMINEM ASSAULTS) AND PUTTING OFF MAJOR POLICY DECISIONS
TO AWAIT THE RIPENING OF CONSENSUS. THIS IS GOVERNMENT
QUINTESSENTIALLY A LA BELGE. THE QUESTION NOW BEGINNING

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TO BE ASKED IS WHETHER, IN TIMES WHEN BASIC ISSUES OF
NATIONAL PURPOSE AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE MUST BE DEALT
WITH, THE TRADITIONAL BELGIAN WAY OF MUDDLING THROUGH TO
ARRIVE EVENTUALLY AT A TOLERABLE COMPROMISE IS ADEQUATE
TO THE TIMES.

4. EVEN IF TINDEMANS WERE AN ADENAUER, HE WOULD NEVERTHE-
LESS HAVE TROUBLE MANAGING A COALITION WHICH INCLUDED THE
PRESENT BELGIAN SOCIALIST PARTY. OSTENSIBLY THE ONLY
MAJOR POLITICAL ORGANIZATION REMAINING NATIONAL IN SCOPE,
THE PSB TODAY IS NOT ONLY SUBJECT TO FLEMISH-FRANCOPHONE
TENSIONS BUT ALSO FISSURED ALONG REGIONAL, IDEOLOGICAL
AND PERSONAL LINES. THERE IS NO DOMINANT NATIONAL LEADER
OF THE PARTY, AND NO PLANK IN THE SOCIALIST PLATFORM NOT
SUBJECT TO DISPARATE INTERPRETATIONS BY DIFFERENT PARTY
FACTIONS. IT HAS MANAGED TO WORK CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH ITS
COALITION PARTNERS FROM TIME TO TIME BUT THIS HAPPENS
PRIMARILY WHEN THE INTERESTS OF THE SOCIALIST CONSTITUENCY
ARE BEING SERVED, AS IS UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF LEGISLATION.

MUCH OF THE TIME THE PSB HAS RETAINED THE MENTALITY OF AN ILL-TEMPERED OPPOSITION PARTY. FRANCOPHONE CO-PRESIDENT ANDRE COOLS, THE SOCIALIST SATRAP OF LIEGE, SNIPES AT THE
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GOVERNMENT HE HELPED CREATE. ECONOMIC MINISTER WILLY CLAES GETS MORE BRICKBATS FROM HIS OWN PARTY'S LEFT THAN HE DOES FROM THE LIBERAL (CONSERVATIVE) OPPOSITION. CLAES' SUCCESSOR AS FLEMISH CO-PRESIDENT, THE YOUTHFUL KAREL VAN MIERT, FOR SHORT-TERM PARTISAN POLITICAL GAIN HAS CHALLENGED THE DEFENSE MINISTER'S COMPETENCE TO MANGE HIS OWN MINISTRY. PARADOXICALLY THE SOCIALIST PARTY AS A MEMBER OF THE GOVERNMENT COALITION IS A LARGER OBSTACLE TO CONSEQUENT GOVERNMENT THAN IT WAS WHEN IN OPPOSITION. FREE OF RESPONSIBILITY DURING THE 1974-77 YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, THE PSB TACITLY SUPPORTED THE NATIONAL CONSENSUS ON DEFENSE AND FOREIGN POLICY AS WELL AS THE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ON WHICH BELGIAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMY ARE BASED. NOW INSIDE THE GOVERNMENT, IT IS TEMPTED TO DODGE RESPONSIBILITY FOR EXPENSIVE OR CONTROVERSIAL DECISIONS, AND TO PLAY THE OPPOSITION GAME FROM INSIDE.

5. THE TWO LINGUISTIC PARTIES, THE FLEMISH VOLKSUNIE AND THE FRANCOPHONE DEMOCRATIC FRONT, HAVE CONTRIBUTED LITTLE TO THE SECOND TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT. BEING ONE-ISSUE PARTIES, THEY ANALYZE COALITION AFFAIRS IN TERMS OF SECTARIAN INTERESTS. INEXPERIENCED IN GOVERNMENT, THEY HAVE CONTRIBUTED WEAK MINISTERS TO THE CABINET. IT TOOK FDF MINISTER OF POSTS DEFOSSET ONLY SIX MONTHS TO GIVE RISE TO ACCUSATIONS OF FINANCIAL IMPROPRIETIES THAT HAVE EMBARRASSED TINDEMANS.

6. FOR THE REASONS CITED ABOVE, BELGIUM HAS REACHED AN IRONIC STAGE IN ITS POLITICAL LIFE: A NEW GOVERNMENT SO BROADLY BASED THAT IT CAN DO ANYTHING IS, IN FACT, SUBSTANTIALLY WEAKER THAN THE BARELY VIABLE COALITION IT REPLACED. THE NEED TO NEGOTIATE OUT WITHIN THE
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COALITION EVERY SIGNIFICANT GOVERNMENT DECISION AND TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE DEMANDS OF VIRTUALLY EVERY INTEREST GROUP IN THE COUNTRY HAS ATTENUATED ITS ABILITY TO ACT. THE DECISIONS THAT DO EMERGE TEND TO BE BLURRY COMPROMISES- THE INTERNAL WEAKNESS OF TINDEMANS II IS BEGINNING TO SHOW IN BELGIUM'S CURRENT BEHAVIOR ON THE INTERNATIONAL

STAGE.

7. THE SOMETHING-FOR-EVERYONE COMPROMISE IS A FAMILIAR BELGIAN DEVICE TO RESOLVE DOMESTIC STRUGGLES, BUT RARELY SINCE 1945 HAVE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS AFFECTING BELGIUM'S SECURITY BEEN SUBJECTED TO SUCH POLITICKING. THE TRADITIONAL BELGIAN APPROACH TO SUCH KEY MATTERS MAY, HOWEVER, BE CHANGING. IF SO, IT IS NOT BECAUSE AN ALTERNATIVE ORIENTATION TO BELGIUM'S NATO-EC COMMITMENT IS PUT FORTH BY ANY PERSON OR PARTY OF CONSEQUENCE. THE MORE PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION IS THAT UNEMPLOYMENT, ECONOMIC STAGNATION, WORRISOME NEW PROBLEMS OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL AGE AND A YOUNG GENERATION ALL TOO READY TO TAKE PEACE AND PROSPERITY AS GOD-GIVEN RIGHTS HAVE ERODED THE BELGIAN PEOPLE'S COMMITMENT TO A DISCIPLINED APPROACH TO ESSENTIALS. (SOCIALIST VOTERS HAVE ALWAYS TENDED TO RANK SOCIAL NEEDS AHEAD OF NATIONAL DEFENSE REQUIREMENTS).

8. IN ANY EVENT, BELGIUM'S WAY OF HANDLING DIFFICULT DEFENSE AND SECURITY ISSUES HAS SENSIBLY CHANGED IN RECENT MONTHS.

-- IT PLEADS FOR DELAY ON DECISIONS TO IMPLEMENT THE LONG-TERM DEFENSE PROGRAM WHICH NATO -- BELGIUM INCLUDED-- ADOPTED LAST YEAR. (REF A)

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-- IT ASKS FOR MORE TIME TO PREPARE PUBLIC OPINION FOR

A DECISION ON THE ER/RB WEAPON ALTHOUGH NO SUCH PREPARATION IS NOW UNDERWAY. (REF B)

-- IT IS STALLING A DECISION ON THE IMPROVED HAWK WEAPONS SYSTEM WHILE THE PSB EXPLOITS THE HAWK CONTROVERSY TO SCORE DOMESTIC POLITICAL POINTS AND TO EMBARRASS DEFENSE MINISTER VANDEN BOEYNANTS.

-- ITS STUDY OF THE PROPOSED COLLOCATION OF THE U.S. EUROPEAN COMMAND WITH SHAPE, WHICH WILL EVENTUALLY REQUIRE AN UNPLEASANT POLITICAL DECISION, PROCEEDS AT A PACE SEEMINGLY CALCULATED TO PUT OFF THAT DECISION AT LEAST FOR A LONG TIME.

9. IT IS TO BE NOTED THAT THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT HAS NOT YET SAID "NO" TO ITS ALLIES ON ANY OF THESE QUESTIONS. IT MAY EVENTUALLY COME AROUND ON ALL OF THEM. BUT THE IMAGE OF BELGIUM AS AMONG THE STAUNCHER AND CLEARER-MINDED OF THE SMALL NATO MEMBERS HAS BLURRED OF LATE. IT IS TO BE NOTED THAT -- SO FAR -- A PARALLEL DETERIORATION IN BELGIUM'S APPROACH TO
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INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ISSUES HAS NOT TAKEN PLACE. APART FROM MINOR CONCESSIONS TO PROTECTIONIST PRESSURES, THE CURRENT BELGIAN GOVERNMENT HAS KEPT FAITH WITH LIBERAL PRINCIPLES ON TRADE AND MULTILATERAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION. THIS SUGGESTS THAT, CONSCIOUSLY OR OTHERWISE, THE EASY WAY IS BEING CHOSEN TO RELIEVE THE STRAINS ARISING FROM DOMESTIC POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC MALAISE, I.E., AT THE COST OF UNPOPULAR DEFENSE COMMITMENTS AND EXPENDITURES.

10. THIS IS NOT A REASSURING CONCLUSION. IT WILL BE HARDER, AT LEAST FOR SOME TIME TO COME, FOR NATO AND FOR THE USG TO GET THE RIGHT DECISIONS OUT OF THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT. IT BEHOOVES US TO PONDER WHAT
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MEASURES -- CARROTS OR STICKS OR A JUDICIOUS MIXTURE OF BOTH -- MIGHT USEFULLY BE APPLIED TO ASSIST A BASICALLY WELL-INTENTIONED GOVERNMENT TO MEET ITS RESPONSIBILITIES. WE HAVE MADE A START IN THAT DIRECTION (REF C). CHAMBERS

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